



A mystic story



👁 585 ✓ 74 ★ 67

Chapter 1 by Andi

A tall man with a bushy beard was sitting in a rocking chair in front of the fireplace. He had a fresh Daily News issue in his arms. A small piece of coal was burning down in the fireplace. An outsider could think that the man was reading the newspaper. However, his eyes were immovable. The man was dead.

Chapter 2 by Yuliya Sabalevich



Yes, the man was dead. His body was breathless. Moreover, his body was cold and rock hard as if he had died long time ago.

Another puzzle. Another strange death. Bob Flores – the local sheriff – was fed up with these deaths! The 7th strange death over the last 3 months! Why the newspaper was still in this man's hands? How could it be that the dying man not drop it? Why the coal was still burning down in the fireplace? Who was burning coal in the grate while the dead man was sitting just in front of it? And why this happened in this damn small town?

Bob moved here half a year ago to find peace of mind and live in harmony. He was sure that

complaints about noisy parties and drunk teenagers would be the only problems in such a place. Bob was quite wrong.

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Chapter 3 by Selena Rayner

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Seven people dead and locals give no damn. Sheriff couldn't find anyone who'd be willing to cooperate with his investigations, while local judge always ruled those 'incidents' were 'accidents' - and he was requested to agree.

Not that he had something solid to go upon; these things might have been accidents alright. But they could have been something more.

Bob winced at the setting sun, as he sat on the porch of his small cottage with a bottle of good beer.

First, there was that girl Elza. A girl that drowned herself in the river, nothing much about it, no marks on the body to suggest anything but suicide. She wore her best new dress and was made up for a big dance with her boyfriend, who waited for her at the club in the neighboring town for hours; her mother swore the girl talked happily about her date before leaving home. Also Elza's shoes were missing - apparently, she took them off and threw them away somewhere.

Then there was old Mrs. Higgins, who tripped on the stairs of her cellar, fell and broke her neck. Only why didn't she turn the lights on while going down the stairs? The switch and the light-bulb were fully operational and no one confessed to turning the lights off.

Then, that little boy Tommy, only 7 years old. He shot himself in the head with his father's gun that had gone missing from the locked safe in their family house. Father claimed he'd never noticed the gun wasn't in the safe and that he was very particular about his weapon. Tommy could have stolen the gun somehow, sheriff agreed on that. Still little boys usually shot other things than themselves with toy guns. Ballistics and fingerprints matched the theory of 'accident'.

Then...

Bob sighed: a phone call from his forensic expert, local surgeon Henry, interrupted his thoughts.

Chapter 4 by Selena Raynee



"Any good news?"

"Depends on what you call good news, sheriff," Henry sounded as jolly as ever. "It's about old Robinson, the one with the news."

How could he forget?

"What about him?"

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"Cause of death is most probably heart failure. No external marks on the body, empty stomach, that kind of thing. I'll request a tox screen from the lab just in case, but the man was over 70, avoided doctors. Heart failure seems plausible. Only -"

"Yes?" Bob cursed to himself.

"You were right about the body temperature. If there wasn't a fire burning in the fireplace, I'd say he was dead 2, maybe 3 hours before we found him -"

"What if there was a big fire during the night?"

"It would slow cooling of the body, making it 7 to 9 hours. Which means -"

"Which means, Robinson couldn't have bought that Daily News issue himself, it wasn't out yet"

"You got it"

Bob sighed. He could persuade himself he didn't see the coals and huge amount of warm ash in the fireplace (meaning it was recently used); he was sure no one would notice it in his report.

"Bob? So what do we do?"

Judge Brown would push for 'natural death' verdict. Sheriff scowled at the sun that was about to disappear behind the pinetrees, thinking of peace and quiet he desired so much. Not going to happen, huh?

"Let's find out where that newspaper came from, before we stick our necks out"

Chapter 5 by Selena Raynee



Questioning didn't yield definite results: no one saw old Robinson buy Daily News, no one saw him in town on that day at all.

An old grocer (who used to be in school with Robinson ages ago) told sheriff it wasn't Robinson's grocery day so he shouldn't have been in town. Of course, he could have had an appointment or needed to buy stamps or whatever, but otherwise it was highly unlikely that he'd leave his house. If it wasn't for Robinson's young neighbor who was going to a county sale and dropped in to ask whether the old man wanted something, the body wouldn't have been discovered for several days.

Someone else visited Robinson and brought that newspaper.

Sheriff knew that didn't mean much by itself: Judge Brown would say that whoever visited the

old man didn't want to be mixed up with police and wouldn't come forward even though he or she was completely innocent. But he was still a local diner when his assistant called.

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8th death, a hiker that plucked a bird from a nest in the thorns and thorny bushes. Looking down on tattered bloody mess that used to be a living human being, sheriff shuddered.

Henry cautiously removed a backpack from hiker's body, turned him over and everyone saw white paper stained with dry blood - hiker was carrying a rolled newspaper in his left hand when he fell and didn't let it go during the fall.

Sheriff and surgeon looked at one another.

"Daily News?"

"Yes," Henry nodded. "Yesterday's edition"

The same paper old Robinson was holding.

Chapter 6 by Selena Raynee



Henry accompanied hiker's body to town's morgue (it wasn't built to be so crowded), while sheriff stayed to examine the scene of the 'accident'. He couldn't find evidence that the poor man was pushed to his death or was done in any other way. Accident, plain and simple: boulders on the edge of the path were unstable and did not support human weight; they found a spot of wet ground and trail of boulders shifting into the ravine.

However, Bob couldn't get that damned newspaper out of his head. Was it a coincidence? Daily News was fairly popular in the county and the dead man was a county resident. Sheriff spent rest of the day talking to relatives of the deceased (nothing stood out, no connection to Robinson or previous cases) and did some paperwork. Henry rescheduled autopsy for tomorrow's morning due to some medical emergency in town, therefore Bob started home early.

He got beef ribs, greens and beer at local shop, anticipating peaceful bbq evening. Paper bag with food was bulky and he hurried to put it down on the kitchen table, only then noticing something that shouldn't be there.

Cold sweat formed at his forehead and heart raced: Daily News, the newest issue. It lay on his table in a manner that suggested it was read and then discarded carelessly.

Bob reached for his gun.

Chapter 7 by Monica



"Not again," he thought to himself. "Not again. I'll get you this time." He gripped tight to the

handle of his pistol and glanced around nervously, trying with all his might to contain his panic. He glanced around even more frantically, trying to find a way out. He could've sworn he had no one. He walked around the corner, down the hallway to his room. He pulled his gun from its holster and was prepared to shoot. He opened the door, stepped out and found Bob's bedroom door, and, in a flurry, he busted it open. For a moment, there was a deafening silence that weighed

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heavily on his shoulders, but in a moment's notice, he was at the open window parallel to his bed, watching a dark figure run off into the night. "Hey," he shouted after it. Bob burst from his front door and followed the shadow. "Stop!" He began shooting blindly into the night, but after a moment, the sprinting proved too much on a food-and-beer-filled Bob and, firing a few more shots, he stopped. The figure vanished, blending in to the blackness. Knowing that he couldn't go home, Bob pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed for Henry. A groggy voice came through the speaker.

"What can I do you for, Sheriff?" a barely-there Henry answered.

"There was a break in; a break in at my house." Bob spoke quickly. "I need a place to stay tonight, or--," he paused, trying to come to terms with this fact. "Or I could very well wind up dead with my eyes locked on the newest issue of The Daily News."

Chapter 8 by Selena Raynee



Drive to Henry's house took 20 minutes in sheriff's SUV. He never visited the surgeon before and was surprised to find a neat little pink-painted house in a well-maintained garden.

Ushered into a cheerful living room, Bob had a feeling his recent adventure was a sort of nightmare. Henry placed two steaming cups of chamomile tea on the table beside a sofa and offered sheriff to join him.

"So can you tell me what happened, sheriff? You sounded nearly hysterical over the phone" Bob obliged, telling Henry everything: what happened today, his suspicions about other deaths, his plans to call in state police to help with the investigations. Surgeon grew gloomier as Bob spoke.

"We might be dealing with a serial killer," sheriff ended his narrative. "Or a conspiracy. I do not know yet, but we have to see into this, you agree?"

"Hard to say," Henry answered vaguely. "When know next to nothing, it's all supposition -"

"Attack on me wasn't a supposition, goddamit! I used all my bullets on a SOB that broke into MY house and left there that damned newspaper!"

"Could be a practical joke by some youth," Henry shrugged. "Very distasteful and stupid, still no harm done. While you discharged your gun with no particular reason"

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"I always did my best to help you, Bob. Excuse me for a moment, I have to put the kettle on -"

When Henry walked out of the room, sheriff sat down on the sofa again and looked around. A thought occurred to him: Henry had a wife and two kids. This house seemed empty and lifeless. He walked into the kitchen quietly just to find his so-called friend putting something into the new cup of tea.

Bob drew his gun.

"Oh come on, sheriff, now you're pointing your gun at me?" Henry smiled.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I thought you might need something to calm your nerves, but feared you'd never take it willingly. Sorry for playing behind your back -"

"Oh really?" sheriff winced. "Where's your family, then?"

"They're visiting my wife's parents, I told you about it several days ago - guess you were too preoccupied and didn't listen"

"Never heard of it," Bob insisted.

"Bob, calm down, please, you're stressed out, I understand... Just put the gun down"

Sheriff hesitated: was he being paranoid?

He had no time to decide, because a human shadow moved behind the window and Bob lost his concentration watching it. It was enough for Henry, who leaped and tried to seize Bob's gun. Bob pushed the trigger instinctively, but a dull click sounded - he forgot to reload.

Surgeon laughed:

"Oh my, you almost shot me, old boy"

"Sorry, I must be out of my mind - for a moment I thought - I thought you had been plotting against me"

"I've said it before, and I will repeat: I always tried to help you -"

"Thank -"

"But," Henry interrupted. "Now that they've seen you aim a gun at me, it can't be helped"

Bob's heart raced:

"They?"

Footsteps behind, footsteps of several people. Were they hiding in the house?

"I knew from the start you would let it in, you're too smart for this town."

"What are you trying to say, Henry?" Bob asked. "His spare magazine was in the car."

"I tried to persuade you to leave, I'm innocent."

Something sharp burned in Henry's chest. He felt dizziness envelop him.

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"But you didn't leave, and you couldn't just keep out of it. Couldn't go with the flow, couldn't agree with the easiest solution -"

"W-w-w-hy?" Bob stammered. Someone was holding him now so he wouldn't fall.

"That's just how the things are done in this town, sheriff. We take care of issues our own way and don't want outsiders meddling in it -"

"Iss-ssue - s?"

"Since you won't live to see the morning, I'll oblige you," Henry looked very sad. "Elza Franklin was a slut sleeping with any man who paid for her, even with outsiders. Such behavior isn't tolerated here, but she defied all warnings. Mrs. Higgins was selling homemade booze to underage customers and thought it was her right to do so... As for Tommy Collins, he knew too much and was bragging about it - he saw Elza's shoe in his neighbor's car and guessed what happened to the girl -"

Bob's head hurt so much...

"Don't worry, there'd be an explanation to all this," Henry's voice sounded from a distance far, far away. "You're the first outsider that resided in this town for years and so it's only logical that you're the scapegoat. If only you kept out of it -"

The last thing Bob saw before darkness swallowed him was Henry's distressed face.

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